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AUTHOR DeJoy, Judith Klippel; Mills, Helen
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ABSTRACT

The Personal Adult Learning Lab, part of the Georgia Center for continuing Education, was established to (1) provide the type of learning environment that can support adult learners in their efforts to develop and direct their own learning projects and (2) enable researchers to learn more about the nature of self-directed learning as demonstrated by adult learners. During the first year of the Learning Lab's operation, three evenly divided groups of learners appeared to use its facilities and equipment--conferees, faculty/staff, and members of the local community. The conferees appeared most interested in materials about management skills, whereas local community members seemed most interested in computer training (especially for the IBM personal computer). The most pervasive first impression among those using the Learning Lab for the first time was that it would be a career counseling and testing service. Both conferees and community clients tended to spend most of their time with instructional materials delivered through computer-assisted instruction or a limited interactive video format. Seventy-seven percent of the conferees and 66 percent of the community clients indicated that the freedom to set one's own learning pace was the most valuable feature of the instruction offered at the center. The learning patterns observed among the users of the Learning Lab appear to confirm existing adult education research, which asserts that adult learning resources should reflect the documented interests and needs of the population being served and should offer learners the opportunity to control and shape their own learning efforts. (MN)

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PATTERNS OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING WITHIN A CONTINUING EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

Dr. Judith Klippel DeJoy
Learning Services Coordinator

Dr. Helen Mills
Department Head

Personal Adult Learning Services
Georgia Center for Continuing Education
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia 30602

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Presented at the 1987 meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Washington, D.C., October 19-24, 1987.

The Georgia Center for Continuing Education, at the University of Georgia, is a major continuing education facility operating within the context of a land-grant state higher education institution. The Georgia Center opened in 1957 under the auspices of a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant. Serving working professional adults interested in non-credit continuing education opportunities, the Georgia Center offers services to some 90,000 adult learners annually, with about 35,000 of those attending conference activities within the Center itself. This population of adult learners is drawn from across the country and across the state, including both the resident academic population and the local community surrounding the University.

In 1984, a Kellogg Foundation grant was awarded to the University for use in four major areas; one of these was within the Georgia Center and included the development of a self-directed learning lab. The Personal Adult Learning Lab was created and designed to explore the phenomenon of self-directed learning, and to provide a learning environment for self-directed learning to occur.

The Learning Lab's mission is twofold. First, the Lab provides the type of learning environment which can support the efforts of adult learners to develop and direct their own learning projects; second, efforts are made to evaluate the nature of the self-directed learning process as demonstrated by adult learners. To accomplish these goals, the Learning Lab offers a variety of self-instructional

learning resources in the form of computer-assisted instruction, videotapes, audiocassettes and print materials. Observations of the users' own efforts to create learning experiences for themselves are recorded.

During the first year of operation, we have learned that adult learners use the Learning Lab in several different ways, and for several different purposes. This paper will describe observed differences in interests/learning needs, use of resources, and evaluation of experiences among adult learners using the Learning Lab between May, 1986 and September, 1987. Suggested instructional principles for developing self-directed learning opportunities within a continuing education context will be discussed.

The adult learners who used the Learning Lab since its opening fell into three general categories: Conferees (individuals attending professional development conferences at the Georgia Center), Faculty/Staff (from the University of Georgia community) and Local Community (individuals from the local area). Each group made about 33% of the inquiries about the Lab, in phone calls and personal visits.

Interests/Learning Needs

Conferees were most interested in materials about management skills, with 31% of all those who responded to questions about interests expressing a choice for management-related resources. This percentage is over twice

that of Local Community clients for such a learning topic (15%).

In contrast to a relatively low expression of interest in management training, Local Community clients, however, expressed a strong interest in computer training for the IBM Personal Computer, with 38% of clients choosing that topic as their reason for using the Lab. This strong interest in learning about computer technology is most intriguing, considering that 80% of all Community clients were adults 36 years old or more, approaching the "computer age" for the first time.

Conferees were less interested in career-exploration resources (11%) than were Local Community clients (22%), but both Conferees and Community clients expressed a similar degree of interest in working with a variety of self-improvement resources (15%).

The few Faculty/Staff clients who used the Lab were exclusively interested in computer training.

Many individuals also expressed their interest in content areas not offered by the Learning Lab, such as: foreign languages, personal financial planning, study skills, managing home and career, math review, business writing and presentation skills.

Of the different first impressions we have observed, the most pervasive has been that of expecting the Learning Lab to be a career counseling and testing service; we have

developed a referral list of local resources to help those people who have contacted the Lab with that expectation.

Choice of Materials

Following the pattern of learning interests described above, most Conferees actually used a variety of management-related learning materials (74% of all materials chosen by Conferees). Twenty six percent of all materials used by Community clients were management-related, but the majority of materials chosen by this category was in the computer training content area (63%).

Only 9% of all materials used by Community clients were career-exploration resources; only 7% of the same materials were chosen by Conferees.

Evaluation of Learning Experiences

Both Conferees and Community clients tended to spend their time in the Lab with learning materials delivered through a computer-assisted instruction or limited interactive video format (75% materials for Conferees; 89% materials for Community clients). Although the exposure to this form of instructional delivery was similar for both groups, they differed in the degree to which they considered computer or interactive video technology in the Lab helpful to their learning experience.

Of the clients answering the question about "helpful factors", 79% of Conferees identified computer-assisted instruction/interactive video as helpful; only 50% of Community clients judged these formats helpful. Both groups

identified "talking" (described as the opportunity to ask questions and discuss items with a facilitator) as a helpful factor (57% of Conferees; 58% of Community clients). Both groups identified the use of audiocassettes and videotapes as somewhat helpful (36% for Conferees; 33% for Community clients).

In an effort to solicit a broader range of responses to the question about helpful factors for learning, an open-ended question about "what was most helpful..." was added at the start of the second year of Lab operation (5/87). Of clients who responded, 77% of Conferees identified the "opportunity to pace yourself, step-by-step" as valuable, as did 66% of Community clients. With the introduction of the open-ended question, the "facilitator" as a helpful factor was only identified by 23% of the Conferees; Community clients who answered this question did not identify this factor.

Finally, clients were asked to indicate what their "next step was" and 26% of Conferees indicated they planned to complete the learning program, at the next opportunity. Only 18% of Community clients stated that they intended to complete their work at a future time. For Faculty/Staff clients answering the question, 33% planned to complete their learning in the future. Fully 23% of Conferees stated that their next step was to implement or apply what they had learned; only 6% of Community clients made a similar statement. Almost 18% of Community clients described their

next step as finding and taking a course on the topic, compared to 10% of Conferees.

What We Have Learned

At the end of a little over a year of operating the Learning Lab, our experiences indicate that a variety of adult learners can, voluntarily, choose and make use of learning resources in a self-directed fashion, and evaluate their learning experiences. Furthermore, it would appear that the Learning Lab must offer a variety of instructional resources to reflect the needs of adults interested in continuing education opportunities. Conferees attending workshops at the Georgia Center focused, primarily, on improving their management and communication skills, while adults from the local community who used the Lab made computer training their first priority. It also appeared that adults from the local community found computer-assisted instruction materials less supportive of their self-directed learning, in part due to much less familarity with that type of information presentation. In combination with our first-hand experiences in the Lab, we were able to conclude that there are a number of different and important "factors" regarding the use of self-instructional learning resources (including CAI) which contribute to a quality self-directed learning experience. Some of these factors, or issues, are expressed in the suggested principles which follow.

Instructional Principles

Drawing on Knowles' assumptions about the adult learning process: 1) increasing self-directedness, 2) the role of experiences, 3) learning readiness based on life stage, 4) immediacy of application, and 5) a problem-centered orientation (Knowles, 1973), and reflecting on own experiences with adult learners in the Learning Lab, we have derived several instructional principles for developing self-directed learning opportunities with a continuing education environment.

Principle #1. The content and subject matter of adult learning resources should reflect the documented interests/needs of the specific population served.

It is obvious that adult self-directed learners interested in different kinds of subjects require a variety of different learning resources; to make those choices in any accurate manner, some assessment of specific learner interests should be made. In our case, the interest in computer training among Community clients surpassed our own prediction of that interest. In a similar fashion, we discovered that fewer clients were interested in career assessment materials than we predicted.

Principle #2. In support of individual learning strategies, instructional resources should offer opportunities for the self-directed learner to "control--manipulate--shape" information to fit his/her personal learning style. The

following characteristics are identified as critical to this "learner control" issue:

a. opportunities to practice new learning immediately;

b. feedback on performance at regular intervals;

c. adjustable levels of difficulty;

d. adjustable pace of presentation;

e. control of sequence of information presentation;

f. opportunity to review/correct/repeat information;

g. opportunity to exit/reenter program without repetition;

g. opportunity to save responses for future use.

The literature supports the idea that adult learners experience the learning process in different ways, as a function of any number of variables, such as previous experiences, levels of attainment, intelligence, motivation and age (Even, 1987). Certain predilictions for processing information, such as reading, listening, practicing, etc. also contribute to the individualistic nature of adult learning (Korhonen & McCall, 1986; James & Galbraith, 1985; Dixon, 1985). We can assume that these types of variables are at work during self-directed learning experiences, as well. Hence, the characteristics of instructional resources are critical to the self-directed learning process.

These characteristics should support the expression of individual learning strategies and adhere to general principles of adult education, for example, the opportunity to focus on learning a single concept at a time, the need to

integrate new information with old, and the need to perceive a similar conceptual framework.

Principle #3. The instructional design features of learning resources should contribute to information presentation in such a way as to enhance (not detract from) the learner's ability to process and assimilate the information:

a. information should be presented in more than one format (eg. watching, hearing, reading);
b. displays (such as screens) should be easy to read, with the correct number of words/graphics;
c. color and graphics should support, rather than distract from, the information;
d. instructions should be clear and the learner should know how to respond;
e. selection of options should be easy to understand and execute;
f. presented information and any support materials should be fully integrated.

Principle #4. The presence of a competent facilitator can contribute to the quality of the self-directed learning experience. A variety of skills are important:

a. ability to listen carefully;
b. ability to explain the self-directed learning opportunities simply and clearly;
c. interviewing techniques;
d. knowledge of available learning resources;
e. qualities of empathy, warmth and respect for

others;

f. an appreciation of different adult learning styles and priorities for information.

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